AN ANALYSIS OF MICHIGANS

UPPER PENINSULA WOLF MANAGEMENT PLAN and POPULATION

Dick Zook, October 2022

Wild life management, without the option of hunting, is not effective management at all! It is at best a low funded reactive attempt to monitor a species with the least amount of effort and reliability. Consider the importance, value, and growth of wild life management over the past 100 years or so. We have progressed from very limited management and very limited knowledge to very scientific, comprehensive, and very effective management processes. Hunting is, and continues to be, the only effective method available to manage and balance wild life populations within our environment. We have also progressed from unregulated harvests to scientifically determined harvest limits to protect and preserve all wildlife, all with hunting community support. Harvests are regulated and adjusted, as needed, to protect the wildlife species.

Michigan’s Upper Peninsula wolf population has been a contested issue for many years. The process utilized by the MDNR for surveying and data analysis to estimatethe wolf population does not meet with a lot of people’s observations or expectations. The wolf population surveys are thought to be a reliable scientific process for gauging wild and free ranging wolf populations, and utilized by game management organizations. However, the surveys are subject to variables, assumptions, and statistics to arrive at an estimated population. If the population survey does not provide a reliable scientific sample of the geographic area, time, or a sufficient amount of survey resources, and only provides for an absolute minimum population estimate, it is very unlikely to provide a reliable scientific population estimate for estimating or managing the wolf population.

Consider that wild life management must include coping with human intervention. We continue to lose acreage and habitat, and it gets broken into smaller pieces over time. The increase in recreational activity continues to disrupt wildlife. Wild life management in Michigan is an absolute necessity in today’s environment, and all species in a given environment must be managed together, or imbalances can result in severe consequences to other species. This analysis emphasizes the need for both a reliable wolf population survey estimate, and an effective wolf (predator) management plan, with a hunting option, to balance the wolf population with the white tail deer population and the smaller moose population.

The most significant issue and controversy surrounding the management of wolves in Michigan, is resolving the question of hunting. Yet the July 2022 draft of the Michigan Wolf Management Plan doesn’t mention hunting until page 36 of a 123-page report, and that only mentioned that the wolves were classified as “game animals” during 2012 and 2013. There was one year that a very limited and controlled harvest wolf hunt was held but that data was not included in the proposed revision of the draft “Wolf Management Plan” report earlier this summer. Additionally, there was no analysis in the draft report of the wolf hunt results, including any effect on the wolf population. Also, the wolf population management report does not indicate what the overall wolf predation effect is on the Whitetail Deer herd or the moose herd. Additionally, it appears the plan was prepared with social issues and people management as the primary concerns. The draft “Wolf Management Plan” appears to presume that a wolf hunt is not needed?

The next significant and controversial issue surrounding the Management of Wolves in Michigan is performing a reliable survey, and thoroughly reporting the results in a timely manner to Michigan citizens. Both Wisconsin and Minnesota have a wolf report available on their web site which is both thorough and informative, which is a sharp contrast to the information/analysis on the Michigan wolf population estimate. They also show how the minimum number is adjusted, including an adjustment for lone wolf observations, to provide a probable wolf population number.

A review of the “2021 U.P. DEER CAMP SURVEY,” which is prepared by the MDNR, provides very good insight into deer management and hunting in the Upper Peninsula. Thanks to those 1572 hunters from cooperating deer camps across 22 Deer Management Units in the U.P. for providing information for many years for this report. From this report (page 28) it was found that hunter observations of other furbearers included in the data collected that includes wolves, coyotes, and bear. This drew immediate attention for the 218 wolf observations as compared to the 228 coyote observations and what it could indicate about the wolf population. This is a surprise as the coyote population/density is typically thought to be much higher than wolves. This also shows an increasing trend for wolf observations.

The U.P. land mass of 16,377 sq mi (google) probably allows for about 10,000 sq mi of wild life habitat. The population of wolves in the UP is estimated to be a minimum of 700 from the 2022 MDNR Wolf Report population survey, which reflects a wolf density of 0.07 wolves per square mile. A coyote population survey or study has not been found to provide a coyote density. However, subjective estimates from various sources over time indicate the coyote density could be between 0.5 and 1 coyote peer square mile which would provide a conservative estimate of probably over 5,000 coyotes. This would indicate the coyote population would be about 7 times larger than the wolf population. The “Deer Camp Survey” shows that coyote observations were distributed across all 22 DMUs in the U.P., and that wolf observations were distributed across 19 DMUs. Also wolf observations were higher than coyote observations in 11 of the DMUs. The sightings per year in the report (page 28) show the most recent three years of wolf observations were 72% higher than the previous three years.

The “2020 Michigan Deer Harvest Survey Report” includes a chart (page 27) that indicates the percentage of trail camera photos of wolves from reporting hunters over the past three years. Page 60 shows that 45,483 U.P. deer hunters used 110,445 trail cameras to collect this data on wolves. This data indicates an increase in wolf pictures the past three years from about 4.4% of hunters to 6.8%, a 54.8% increase. Incidentally, page 61 and 62 of the report shows 38% (West UP) and 42% (East UP) of the cameras photographed wolves as compared to 45% (WUP) and 49% (EUP)of cameras with coyote photos, 40% (WUP) to 52% (EUP) of cameras with bear photos, only 20 % of cameras with bobcat photos. The 2019 “Bear Report” has a graph that indicates the bear population is about 9,500. It is also a surprise that bobcat photos were only about 10% of the wolf photos, but the bobcat population and harvest is unknown. From the data reviewed here it appears that the wolf population is probability much higher than the estimated minimum of 700 wolves as indicated by the MDNR survey. Also is the geographic spread of wolves greater than the geography covered by the MDNR wolf survey?

The whitetail deer herd in the U.P. has been depressed for a number of years and recovery has been limited. Page 23 of the “2020 Michigan Deer Harvest Survey Report” shows the deer density to be 4 to 8 deer per sq mi across most of the U.P. with only about 4 counties ranging from 8 to 12 deer per sq m. This is a very low density and probably reflects both severe winters and excessive predation loses. With an estimated 10,000 sq mi of wildlife habitat, this could amount to a deer population roughly in the range of about 125,000. Existing predators and hunters helped keep the U.P. deer herd in relative balance at a much higher population prior to the introduction of wolves. Recovery from this low deer density/population can be severely limited by wolf predation. Page 46 of the report shows 29,846 deer were harvested in the U.P. during 2020 which includes 6849 antlerless deer. The average annual deer kill from a wolf from various sources is found to range from 10 to 50 deer per year. This analysis roughly estimated the average annual wolf predation to be twenty deer. An estimated minimum of 700 wolves can be expected to result in 14,000 deer being predated, or more than 10% of the deer population. This would be in addition to the normal mortality of deer in the U.P. and would significantly affect the deer population. As the predation is often thought to be of fawns and year-old deer (mostly does), this can be very devastating to maintaining a balanced deer herd in the U.P. Then consider the magnitude of the deer reduction if the wolf predation is nearer to 30 deer per wolf per year for a wolf population nearer to 1,000. The wolf population cannot be managed without a controlled hunt. The deer population and the hunting community is being sacrificed for the benefit of unmanaged wolves. The wolf predation is limiting the deer herd recovery, and if the wolf population is significantly above 700 it will severely compound the situation. The annual replacement of the whitetail deer herd through fawn recruitment can very between near zero to near 50%. Typically, the deer will replace about 25% of the population on an annual basis, and can recover a severe population reduction in a few years with normal conditions. However, with the present/continued situation the deer population could remain depressed for a very long time. The effect of wolf predation on the limited moose population is unknown as is the loss to many other small animals or fowl.

In summary.

It can be expected that any wildlife population can continue to expand in a welcome environment with sufficient food until that food source is severely reduced. The deer are obviously a major food source for the wolves. It is probable that the deer herd will continue to decline and hunting could become more limited. Hunting deer is being threatened by not having controlled hunting of the wolves. Hunting is essentially the only wildlife management tool available to control wildlife populations, and favoring one specie (wolf) over a significant adverse effect on another (whitetail deer) is unacceptable. It is essential that a controlled annual wolf hunt is utilized to limit the predation of deer and support the deer population recovery.

Is it highly probable that the Wolf population will continue to increase.

Is it highly probable the Wolf population is substantially higher that the MDNR minimum estimate of 700.

Is it highly probable the wolf predation has adversely affected the deer population.

It is probable that deer population recovery has been held down by wolf predation.

Is it essential that controlled wolf hunts be implemented to allow recovery of the deer population, and establish a balance with the deer population?

When there is a viable and sustainable wolf population in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula that is only protected from any human interference, including harvest, it is not wildlife management, it is only people management. This results in indiscriminately sacrificing the delicately balanced management of both the whitetail deer and moose populations on the landscape. With a severely depressed Whitetail Deer herd in the UP, and an un-hunted wolf population, the deer herd may never recover.